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SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: PURSUING NORMALCY, LAVROV VISITS WARSAW
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¶1. (C) Summary: Polish diplomats tell us it was a "miracle" that FM Lavrov visited Warsaw September 10-11, citing Poland's signing of the missile defense agreement and support for Georgia as justifications to cancel. The MFA reported that Lavrov never considered canceling the visit, and Russia would continue to work with its international partners. The usually outspoken Lavrov was more restrained than in prior public appearances, making an effort at constructive engagement; which fellow "new Europe" Latvian diplomats interpreted as a positive sign for FM Riekstins October 22-23 visit. While both Polish diplomats and the MFA agree that there was little substance to the visit, it was a sign that Russia was not altering its business due to the Georgia crisis. End summary.

"It was a miracle"

¶2. (C) On September 10-11, Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov visited Warsaw, where he met with Polish Foreign Minister Radoslaw Sikorski and Prime Minister Donald Tusk (reftel), reinvigorating a dialogue format that had languished for four years until Sikorski's visit to Moscow in January 2008. Polish diplomats here tell us that it was a "miracle" that Lavrov's visit happened at all. Lavrov had two good reasons to cancel: the August 15 signing of the missile defense agreement with the U.S. and Poland's outspoken support for Georgia. While these issues were discussed, Lavrov highlighted bilateral ties by attending a breakfast session of the Citizens' Dialogue Forum, comprised of notables from Russia and Poland, and he included the lingering bilateral issues of navigational agreements and declassification of Russian documents concerning the Katyn massacre, as requested by the Committee on Difficult Matters. Lavrov's trip was intended as a reciprocal visit to that of Sikorski in January and Tusk in February.

MFA: Situation Normal

¶3. (SBU) Vladimir Tkachyoz of the MFA's Polish Desk, in a briefing to foreign diplomats on September 19, called Lavrov's trip an "important working visit." He noted the positive atmosphere, despite dealing with the "negative issues" of ballistic missile defense and the Caucasus. Lavrov made clear that Russia "remained absolutely opposed" to the presence of ballistic missile defense sites in Poland and in Eastern Europe. Lavrov welcomed the Polish and American offers for transparency, but Tkachyoz claimed that there had been "no concrete proposals" from either to date. Tkachyoz acknowledged Polish concerns over the Nord Stream pipeline project, but he said up that "business is business" and reiterated Baltic and German support for the project. When asked if Lavrov ever considered canceling the visit, Tkachyoz replied that it was never raised or considered in the Ministry or by the Polish government, "we can always work with our partners -- the Poles, the Europeans, the U.S., and others."

Lavrov to the Press

14. (SBU) The Russian MFA posted Lavrov's September 8 Polish Television interview and his September 11 joint press conference with FM Sikorski. Lavrov best summed up the approach for the visit himself during the press conference, "although we do not see eye to eye on all issues, we do cherish this dialogue." Lavrov "regretted" Poland's joint statement with the Baltic states in support of Georgia, and he labeled Poland's signature of the missile defense agreement "a mistake." However, he highlighted areas of mutual understanding and the importance of good bilateral relations. He noted the countries' close cultural ties and joint membership in the anti-Nazi coalition during World War II. When pressed on what the GOR would do in response to Poland's hosting a missile defense site, he lashed out that it was not up to him to reveal the secrets of the Russian General Staff. This and a similarly sharp response to a question regarding South Ossetian leader Kokoity's statements calling for reunification with Russia (which Lavrov refuted), were the notable exceptions to the carefully prepared script of this relatively quiet visit.

Others Taking Note

15. (C) The Latvian Embassy told us it had closely watched the tone and the conduct of Lavrov's visit to Poland, as a cue on how the GOR would handle relations with the "new" Europe following the Georgia crisis. FM Maris Riekstins is

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scheduled to visit Moscow October 22-23 and the Russian-Latvian inter-governmental committee is scheduled to meet in November. Latvian diplomats told us that they were frustrated by the lack of replies from the MFA and other ministries, who were finalizing agreements to be signed during the FM's visit. Now that Lavrov's visit to Poland had concluded, they hoped to see some progress on Riekstins's visit.

Comment

16. (C) The normally outspoken Lavrov, while bristling at some of the press's questions, held himself in check during his visit. Rather than use this visit to lash out at Poland and the "new Europe," he instead took the opportunity to show that Russia wanted constructive engagement with the region. Given the lack of substance in the visit and Lavrov's mild tone, it is clear that Russia is focusing on the message that the Georgia crisis will not undermine normal diplomatic business.

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